

In Arlington Heights, a recipe for a successful downtown

[dh dailyherald.com/business/20170911/in-arlington-heights-a-recipe-for-a-successful-downtown](http://dailyherald.com/business/20170911/in-arlington-heights-a-recipe-for-a-successful-downtown)

Kerry
Lester

9/10/2017



The growing interest in Arlington Heights' downtown scene shows in something as simple as the number of available parking spaces.

Up until this summer, shop owners say, there would nearly always be open spots on weekday afternoons along the main downtown thoroughfares.

These days, a spot can't be found after 3 p.m., said Amanda Manno, manager of Vanessa's Modern Bride on busy Campbell Street.

And evenings bring crowds, with restaurant patrons spilling onto streets, families getting frozen yogurts and residents relaxing on balconies of apartments and condos above the business district.

Village officials and business owners don't point to a single reason for the phenomenon. Instead, it's a multi-ingredient recipe for success -- the product of careful urban planning coming to fruition as the local economy has recovered in recent years and local businesses join forces to entice people to the area.

Experts say an array of dining options and an impressive roster of events -- from farmers markets to outdoor musical entertainment -- are keys to success in suburban downtowns.

Like Arlington Heights, suburbs such as Libertyville, Naperville and St. Charles seem to have found the formula of

vibrant shopping, dining and entertainment to fuel a downtown renaissance.

Libertyville is seeing a surge in downtown restaurants with outdoor patios along Milwaukee Avenue. The front doors of restaurants are often propped open on cool summer evenings, inviting customers and giving the town a European feel.

With nearly every commercial space filled and parking at such a premium the village added an \$8.7 million garage earlier this year. "It's not a bad problem to have," Libertyville Mayor Terry Weppler has said.

Naperville's array of downtown draws includes Anderson's Bookshop, which publishers now rely on as they send popular authors out on book tours.

"Last summer we had a big Harry Potter event and it was great, because everyone was involved. The nearby restaurants were serving Harry Potter style food and butter beer ... publishers are sending the big authors here and they recognize our town and community will draw in an audience," Anderson's spokeswoman Candy Purdom said.

Events are integral to success, businesses and planners say.

"What the village does is really intelligent," said Max Huber, manager of Mexican restaurant Salsa 17 in Arlington Heights. "They've created food festivals, art festivals, things that have made it a destination for the area."

Charles Perkins, director of planning and community development for the village since the late 1980s, says the boom is a result of long-term strategy finally coming to fruition.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Arlington Heights' downtown was deteriorating, with a lot of vacant storefronts and restaurants, Perkins said. In a major redevelopment about 20 years ago, some established buildings were razed and new ones built that included both residences and commercial space, a much-copied strategy in the suburbs. It was controversial at first, with decades-old businesses like Hagenbring's making way for new spaces like the Metropolis Performing Arts Centre.

In 2007, Perkins said, the village adopted a new downtown master plan with a goal to be "a cultural, more urban suburb allowing for additional density" through the construction of more condos and public parking garages throughout downtown.

"We don't have a lake, we don't have a river, so we had to create enough density to support the businesses and attract the businesses we wanted to see," he said. "What we've tried to do is make sure all of the developments have good and active street presences and the residential units above are beautiful high-quality units."

Lindsay Bayley, a senior planner with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, a group that uses federal funds to help local communities enhance quality of life through urban planning, noted that as retail has struggled in recent years because of increased popularity of online merchants like Amazon.com, local downtowns have seen much of their growth through restaurants.

"Dining out is an experience you can't have online," she said.

Arlington has continued to tweak its strategy -- focusing on making what's working well, in particular with restaurants, work even better.

One major recent development is allowing restaurants featuring outdoor dining to expand table space onto public sidewalks.

This summer, the village has also begun reviewing its health standards to allow businesses to open their windows and provide open-air dining -- beginning with new Asian fusion restaurant Shakou.

"We looked at about 30 surrounding (suburban) communities and even Chicago for that and then met with our health department," Perkins said, noting that previously, Arlington Heights didn't allow windows to be open without a screen in place.

Free summer concerts provided by the village on Thursday and Friday evenings at Harmony Park at Vail and Campbell streets bring out droves of families who stay for a bite to eat and do some window shopping while walking to and from restaurants.

The concerts have prompted Vanessa's bridal -- previously an appointment-only shop -- to expand its hours and allow walk-ins, particularly around the time of concerts, manager Amanda Manno said. And some prime real estate is being shuffled around. Popular pizza restaurant Armand's recently moved into the site previously occupied by shuttered '50s diner Circa 57, at the corner of Vail and Wing streets.

CMAP is helping the village develop a bike and pedestrian plan to encourage more people to go downtown and to reduce traffic congestion. The group found that nearly 30 percent of residents work in Arlington Heights or within easy cycling distance of neighboring communities and the village's downtown features an extremely high "walk score," making it easy to travel from one destination to another.

Bigger crowds bring some new problems. A man was stabbed with a beer bottle in a fight with two other men last month in downtown Arlington Heights. In Naperville, a man was charged with felony aggravated battery after following a woman out of a downtown business and punching her in the face.

In both cases, police have increased their presence in downtown as a result.

Perkins says village officials on their travels often bring back ideas from towns across the nation.

"Whenever I go somewhere I'm always looking at that and come back with ideas," he said. Recently, he said he's seen downtowns in Bethesda, Maryland, and Oak Park decorated with strings of overhead white lights -- an idea Arlington Heights is looking to move forward on early in 2018.

Likewise, other suburbs learn from the local successes, adding dining, residences, events and other reliable draws.

CMAP's Bayley has been working with the city of Aurora as it wraps up its downtown master plan.

The plan, she said, "builds on successes they've had, and aims to have more people living in the downtown. That's really going to breathe more life into the area."